



San Francisco Department of Public Health

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Overdose Deaths on the Rise in San Francisco, Mostly Due to Fentanyl ***San Francisco Department of Public Health releases verified data for the first six months of 2019***

City responds to threat of fentanyl and methamphetamine

SAN FRANCISCO, CA – The San Francisco Department of Public Health today released data on drug overdose deaths in San Francisco that show a sharp increase in mortality in the first six months of 2019, mostly attributed to fentanyl. The data also show a rise in deaths from overdoses of methamphetamine.

An extremely potent and fast-acting opioid, fentanyl first began to appear as a contaminant in other street drugs. In recent years, it has penetrated the drug supply in San Francisco and become a drug of choice for some people.

“San Francisco averted the increases in overdose death seen across the country from the prescription opioid and heroin crises, which we attribute to robust overdose prevention and treatment services,” said Dr. Phillip O. Coffin, Director of Substance Research at the San Francisco Department of Public Health. “Unfortunately, since the second half of 2018, we – like every community that has seen fentanyl take over the street opioid market – have faced rising mortality due to fentanyl.”

Fentanyl: by the numbers

In 2016, 22 people in San Francisco died of fentanyl overdose, double the number in 2015. Fentanyl overdose deaths rose to 36 in 2017, then to 89 in 2018. In the first six months of 2019, 69 overdose deaths were attributed to fentanyl. Partial data from the second half of 2019 suggest that we will see a substantial increase when complete data are available.

Methamphetamine: by the numbers

In 2016, 88 people in San Francisco died of methamphetamine overdose, compared to 81 in 2015. Methamphetamine overdose deaths rose to 99 in 2017, then to 126 in 2018. In the first six months of 2019, 112 overdose deaths were attributed to methamphetamine. Partial data from the second half of 2019 suggest that we will see a significant increase in methamphetamine deaths when complete data are available.



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Overdose death data overall

Overdose deaths in San Francisco began a notable rise in the second half of 2018. The city saw 222 overdose deaths in 2017, and 259 in 2018. Overdose deaths continued to increase in the first six months of 2019, with 182 confirmed through June 30.

To present these six-month reports of overdose deaths, the San Francisco Department of Public Health extracts data from state records which reflect months of toxicology testing, investigation and verification.

The Health Department also regularly collects and analyzes data from multiple sources on substance use in the city, in order to allocate resources and invest in prevention, harm reduction and treatment programming that reflects the City's current needs. In December 2019, the Health Department published [the most recent annual report on substance use trends in San Francisco](#).

Investing in harm reduction

San Francisco's continuum of substance use disorder services is based on the principles of harm reduction, which have guided our work for well over a decade. Harm reduction is a public health tenet that promotes methods of reducing the physical, social, emotional and economic harms associated with drug and alcohol use and other behaviors that impact individuals and their community. Harm reduction saves lives and allows for people who use drugs to pursue recovery and wellness.

One of San Francisco's most successful harm reduction tactics is the distribution of naloxone (also known as Narcan). Since 2003, DPH has worked with community partners to get naloxone into the hands of people who use drugs and their friends. These community members have saved lives thousands of times, as have the paramedics and police officers who routinely carry naloxone as part of their work. In response to the increasing prevalence of fentanyl, we are aggressively augmenting these efforts.

- The San Francisco DOPE (Drug Overdose Prevention and Education) Project recorded 1,765 life-saving overdose reversals using naloxone in the first nine months of 2019.
- Among the efforts DPH and the DOPE Project are launching in 2020 is an overdose reversal training program for staff and residents in single-room occupancy hotels (SROs), because data show that many overdoses occur when people in SROs are using drugs alone.
- Project FRIEND launched in September 2019, allowing ambulance crews to give naloxone to anyone in the community who is at risk of an overdose or of witnessing one.
- San Francisco Health Network providers co-prescribe naloxone when writing opioid prescriptions for pain.
- To increase the number of people who carry naloxone in the community, people being released from jail receive it when they retrieve their personal property.



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Naloxone distribution is one part of a comprehensive set of harm reduction strategies to address the needs of people who use drugs. These include syringe access and disposal, real-time alerts about dangerous batches of drugs and overdoses, fentanyl test strips and naloxone training. The city also plans to create overdose prevention sites to mitigate one of the significant risk factors in overdose death: using alone.

San Francisco's response to the growing use of methamphetamine is articulated in the [Methamphetamine Task Force report](#) that was presented to the Mayor and the public in October 2019. The top recommendation was to create a trauma-informed sobering site offering harm reduction services for people under the influence of methamphetamine and other stimulants. The Mayor and Supervisor Rafael Mandelman have announced a proposed location for the City's first sobering center to open in the Spring of 2020.

Treatment

In recent years, DPH has significantly expanded access to treatment by bringing the opioid addiction medication buprenorphine directly to people on the street, reducing the barriers that clinic visits and appointments can pose. This medication not only treats addiction to opioids, but also has proven effective at preventing overdose.

"We tell our patients who use opioids that using buprenorphine can stop your cravings and works very well in treating addiction," said Dr. Barry Zevin, whose Street Medicine team at DPH writes about 20 new buprenorphine prescriptions every month for people experiencing homelessness or who have other barriers to accessing traditional health care.

"For people who are not ready to stop using entirely, we find that buprenorphine also treats the risk of opioid overdose," Zevin said. "We have not had overdoses among patients who continue to use buprenorphine. Lowering barriers to addiction treatment saves lives."

DPH also has been working to increase the number of clinicians who can prescribe buprenorphine, and has been prescribing more of it at Zuckerberg San Francisco General Hospital (ZSFG). From April to October 2019, ZSFG saw an average of 13 patients per month start on buprenorphine as part of their care. The hospital now has substance use navigators who help facilitate medication-assisted treatment.

San Francisco also is making it easier to access more traditional substance use disorder treatment. In December 2019, the Health Department launched a new online bed-finder which lists the availability of nearly 500 beds across withdrawal management ("detox"), residential treatment programs, and residential step-down programs where people can live while continuing outpatient care. These beds, and the phone numbers to call to access them, are listed online at FindTreatmentSF.org.



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Safety tips

All consumers of street drugs and prescription opioids should carry naloxone for their own safety and the safety of others. Naloxone is covered by Medi-Cal, Healthy San Francisco, and most health plans. It can be furnished by pharmacists registered to do so without a prescription. Naloxone can be obtained from the CBHS Pharmacy at 1380 Howard St. on a walk-in basis with no prescription required, Monday-Friday 9 a.m.-3:30 p.m. Naloxone is also available at no cost from the DOPE (Drug Overdose Prevention and Education) Project, at syringe access sites and other community-based programs.

San Francisco's syringe access sites provide fentanyl test strips so that people can check the content of their drugs before consuming, and make safety decisions based on that information. Fentanyl test strips and other harm reduction supplies including naloxone also are available at no charge at these locations:

- Glide Harm Reduction Services, 330 Ellis (between Jones & Taylor): Monday-Friday, 12-5 p.m. on the 5th floor, and Monday-Tuesday, 7-9 p.m. in the lobby.
- Sixth Street Harm Reduction Center, 117 6th Street (@ Minna): Monday and Thursday, 9 a.m.-7 p.m.; Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday, 9 a.m.-1 p.m. and 4 p.m.-7 p.m.; and Saturday, 4 p.m.-11 p.m.

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Note to editors: Dr. Coffin will present the latest overdose data and an overview of harm reduction responses to the Health Commission at its Feb. 18 meeting, which begins at 4 p.m. at 101 Grove St., San Francisco.

About SF Department of Public Health

The mission of the San Francisco Department of Public Health (SFDPH) is to protect and promote health and wellbeing for all in San Francisco. SFDPH strives to achieve its mission through the work of two main divisions – the San Francisco Health Network and the Population Health Division. The Network is a community of top-rated clinics, hospitals and programs that serves more than 100,000 people annually at sites such as Castro Mission, Chinatown, and Southeast health centers, Zuckerberg San Francisco General and Laguna Honda Hospital. The goal of Population Health is to ensure San Franciscans have optimal health and wellness at every stage of life. The Division is dedicated to core public health services: health protection and promotion, disease and injury prevention, disaster preparedness and response and environmental health services.

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